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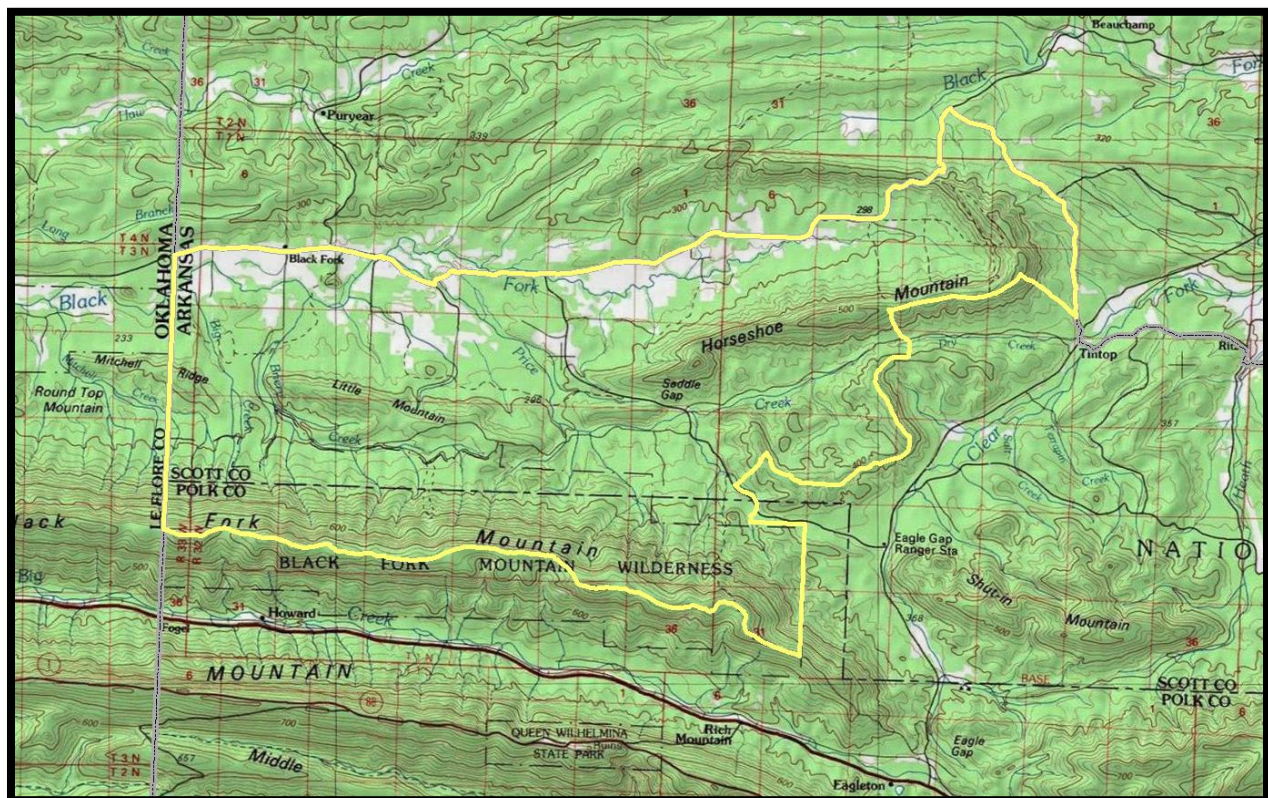
Date: April 28, 2021

Dear Forest Stakeholder:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). I request your input on the following proposed actions regarding management of the Upper Black Fork Project Area.

Upper Black Fork is located on the Mena Ranger District. It is within United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service Region 8 (Southern Region) and is part of the Ouachita National Forest (OUF). The Upper Black Fork Project Area includes approximately 20,365 acres or about 31 square miles; of which 4,099 acres within the project area is privately owned land.

The analysis area for Upper Black Fork is composed of Compartments 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 807, 808, 810, 815, 816, 817, and 819. Geographically, the project area is primarily south of the community of Black Fork, Arkansas, Between Waldron and Mena Arkansas in Township 1N, Range 31W Sections 3-10, 16-21 and 30-31; Township 1N, Range 32W Sections 7-30; Township 1N, Range 33W, Sections 12, 13, 24, and 25; and Township 2N, R31W Sections 33 and 34 in Scott and Polk Counties, Arkansas.





Proposed Action

The Mena-Oden Ranger District proposes to implement management activities identified in Table 1 to meet the needs for Upper Black Fork Project Area. The intent of these activities is to move the project area toward desired conditions described in and adopted by the Ouachita National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan) and to partially meet the objectives established by it.

Table 1: Proposed Upper Black Fork Watershed Project Area Activities

ACTIVITY	APPROXIMATE TREATMENT AREA (acres unless noted)
Commercial Thinning (acres)	5,557
Plantation Thinning (acres)	848
Seed-tree with Reserves/Even-aged Management (acres)	553
Site Preparation by Prescribed Fire, Herbicide, Manual, and/or Mechanical Methods (acres)	618
Hand Planting with Shortleaf Pine (acres)	618
Stocking/TSI Certification Checks (acres)	618
Timber Stand Improvement (Precommercial Thinning) by Manual Methods (acres)	720
Timber Stand Improvement (Release) by Herbicide and/or Manual Methods (acres)	720
Fuel Reduction Prescribed Burning (acres)	11,044
Wildlife Stand improvement midstory reduction by Herbicide, Manual and/or Mechanical Methods (acres)	1,004
Warm Season Native Grass Restoration (acres)	350
Pond Rehabilitation (ponds)	34
Stream Crossings (crossings)	5
Temporary Road Construction (miles)	41
Road Relocation (miles)	5
New Road Construction (miles)	5
Road Maintenance - including installing and/or replacing culverts (miles)	27
Fireline construction (miles)	3



Fireline reconstruction (miles)	20
Non-Native, Invasive Species Eradication by Herbicide and/or Manual Methods (acres)	11,020 ¹
Non-Native, Invasive Species Control of Feral Hogs (traps)	As needed
Resource Protection Gates (openings and ponds)	As needed
Unauthorized Roads– Close and Decommission	As needed
Install Gates or Berms	As needed
Firewood Areas	As needed
Red Cockaded woodpecker treatments	As needed

1-This figure represents the total area of National Forest System lands that could be subject to non-native, invasive species eradication. The actual area of non-native, invasive species eradication needs are unknown at this time but are estimated to be approximately 1-5% of this figure.

Table 2: Percentage of project area by management area (National Forest System Lands) Need for Action

The Revised Forest Plan provides primary direction for all management activities and contains the

<i>Management Area</i>			
<i>1</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>22</i>
32%	7%	17%	44%

Vision, Strategy, and Standards for guiding all-natural, resource management activities for the Ouachita National Forest. Upper Black Fork includes the following Management Areas: Management Area 1 (Wilderness), Management Area 9 (Water and Riparian), Management Area 21 (Old Growth) and Management Area 22 (Shortleaf Pine-Bluestem and Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat).

This proposed action would implement the following Revised Forest Plan direction.

Desired Conditions for Upper Black Fork:

Manage Forest Transportation System

The road system needs management activities in order to protect soil, water, and wildlife resources; reduce road-related barriers to aquatic organism passage; and to provide access to stands within the project area. Needed management activities include construction of new and temporary roads; installing gates or other barriers on closed roads; obliterating unauthorized, user-created roads; and maintaining existing system roads (Map 4).

Improve Forest Health

Opportunities for the creation of early serial habitat by seed-tree with reserves/even-aged management have been identified on 553 acres. Stand-establishment activities (including site-



preparation and planting) and stand-improvement activities (including release and precommercial thinning) are needed on these acres as well. Additional opportunities for the reduction in stocking by commercial thinning (5,557 acres), Plantation thinning (848 acres) (Map 1) and wildlife stand improvement have been identified (1,004 acres) (Map 2).

The majority of treatments would be in stands classified as overstocked. Stocking reduction would reduce the potential for insects, diseases, and wildfires; increase timber growth and yield; stimulate rapid development of foraging habitat; improve forest health; and increase herbaceous plant species diversity in an effort to meet Revised Forest Plan desired conditions.

Maintain or Restore Community Diversity and Reduce Fuel Loads of National Forest System Lands

Reduction of existing fuel loading is needed within the project area in order to maintain and/or restore various ecosystem types (e.g., Ouachita Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest, Ouachita Dry-Mesic Oak Forest, etc.). A prescribed fire program that mimics the natural fire regime is an important management tool for restoring and maintaining most of these communities and providing for patch connectivity among the interspersed communities. Within Upper Black Fork, prescribed-burn area has been identified equaling approximately 11,044 acres (Map 3).

Maintain Full Range of Natural Systems Found Within the Ouachita National Forest

Special emphasis to conserve and restore Ouachita Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest, shale glade, riparian, and other communities through thinning, mid-story reduction, selected herbicide treatment, and/or prescribed fire has been identified as part of the purpose and need for this project area.

Maintain or Improve Long Term Soil Productivity

Unauthorized, user-created trails are impacting long-term soil productivity and need stabilization. Unauthorized, dispersed campsites impacting resources may be closed or rehabilitated in an effort to improve long-term soil productivity.

Supply Commodity and Commercial Uses

There is need to provide a sustained yield of high-quality wood products at a level consistent with sound, economic principles. Hardwood, firewood-collection areas may be made available to the public in order to improve utilization of those products.

Supply a Spectrum of Recreational Facilities and Opportunities

Conventional, motorized use is provided for in construction standards and design of facilities. Opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation may also be provided. Hiking, equestrian use, mountain-bike riding, dispersed camping, OHV (mainly 4-wheelers and dirt-bikes) use, hunting, and driving for pleasure are the predominant recreational activities.



Eradication of Non-Native, Invasive Species

Elimination of non-native, invasive species (e.g. tall fescue, sericea lespedeza, autumn olive, honey suckle, privet, etc.) is needed throughout the Upper Black Fork project area including but not limited to open areas, timber stands, temporary roads, closed roads, trails, and Forest Service System Roads. Control of feral hogs by trapping in coordination with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is also needed in the area.

Invitation to Participate in Project Planning

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time. We will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. With that said, your comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. They will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation and alternative ways to meet Revised Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess public concerns.

Comments received in response to this solicitation—including names and addresses of those who comment—will become a part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. However, anonymous comments will not provide the Forest Service with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Objection Process

This project is subject to subparts A and B of *36 CFR Part 218 Project-Level Predecisional Administrative Review Process* (objection process). It is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA).

The designated opportunity for public comment in response to this solicitation is ***April 28, 2021-May 27, 2021***. Providing specific, written comments during this time will afford you standing to later file an objection to this project should you so desire (see Upcoming Project Planning Steps). Pursuant to §218.2, specific written comments should be within the scope of the proposed action; have a direct relationship to the proposed action; and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.

How to Comment

Specific, written comments must be submitted to: Tim Oosterhous, Mena-Oden District Ranger, ***1603 Hwy 71 North, Mena, AR, 71953, Fax: 479-394-2389***. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a common, digital format to comments-southern-ouachita-mena-oden@fs.fed.us.



Upcoming Project Planning Steps

As stated above, your comments will help us identify issues, and they will be used to formulate alternatives to this proposal. An environmental analysis will be conducted, and the results will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA).

Upon completion, the draft EA will be released for public review and comment. A 30-day notice and comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 218 will be initiated. This comment period will afford you another opportunity to obtain standing to later file an objection to the project should you desire.

A cultural resources consultation, in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act (54 USC 300101 et seq.), will be submitted separately from the environmental assessment. The relevant cultural resources survey is expected to result in a sample survey totaling approximately 50% coverage of Forest Service lands within the Area of Potential Effects for proposed undertakings associated with this project. In addition to the Arkansas State Historic Preservation Officer, these consultations are anticipated to be transmitted to the following Tribes that have previously indicated interest in this project area: The Caddo Nation of Oklahoma, The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, The Osage Nation of Oklahoma, The Quapaw Nation of Oklahoma, and The Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. The cultural resources consultation may also be phased in accordance with 36 CFR 800.14 and (pending the ratification of) programmatic agreements among the U.S. Forest Service, Ouachita National Forest, Arkansas State Historic Preservation Officer, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and interested Tribes.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, specific-written comments regarding this project and attributed to the objector unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

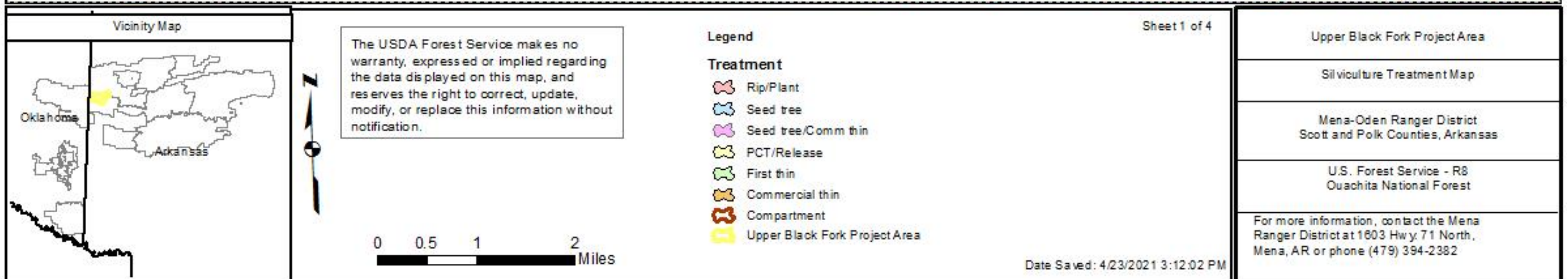
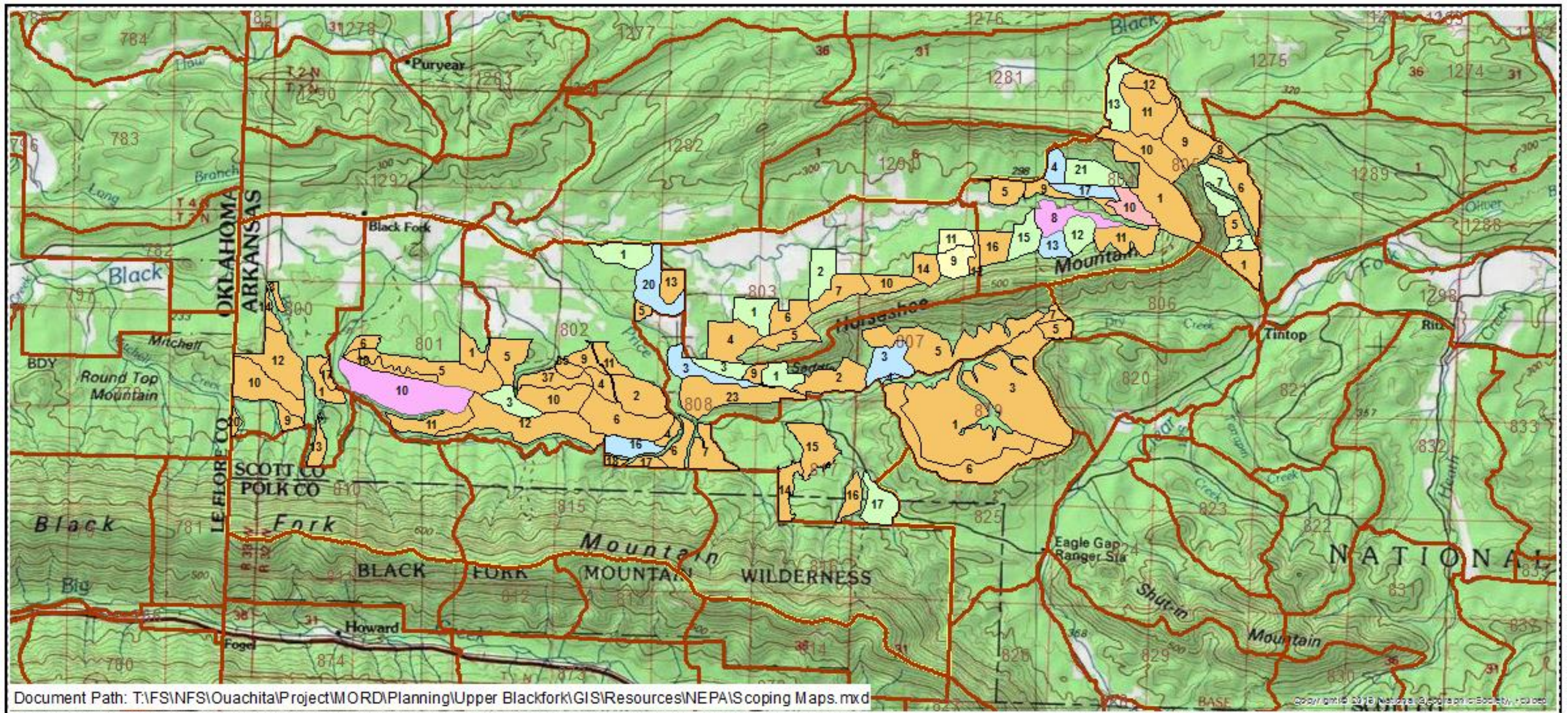
If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please, contact **Jade Ryles** at (479) 394-2382 or charity.j.ryles@usda.gov.

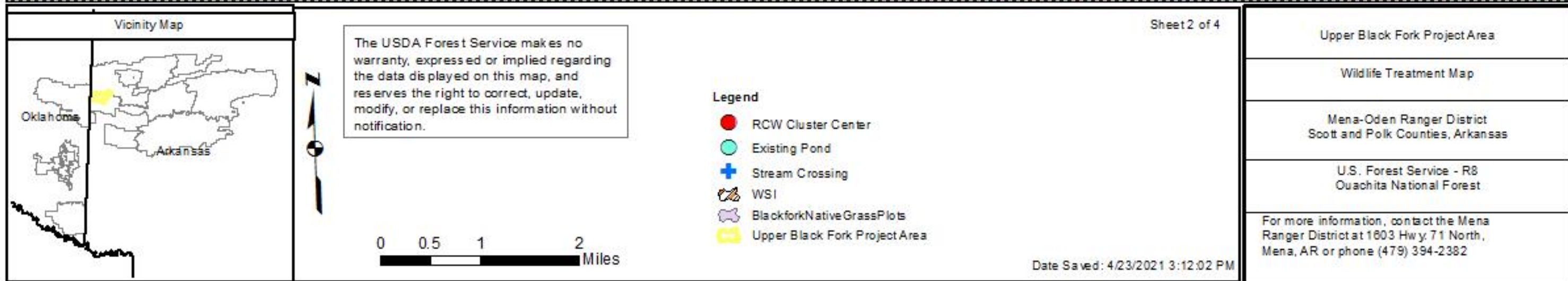
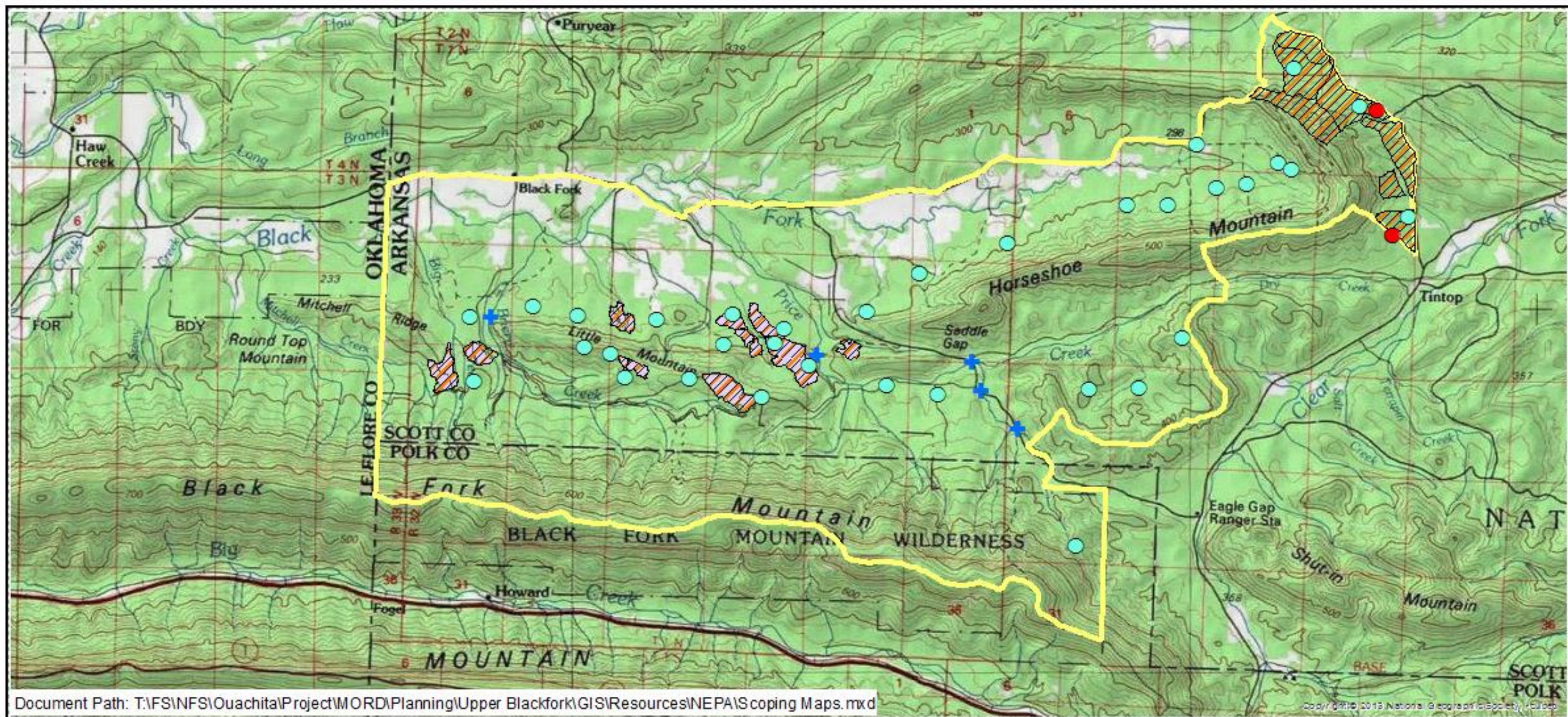
Sincerely,

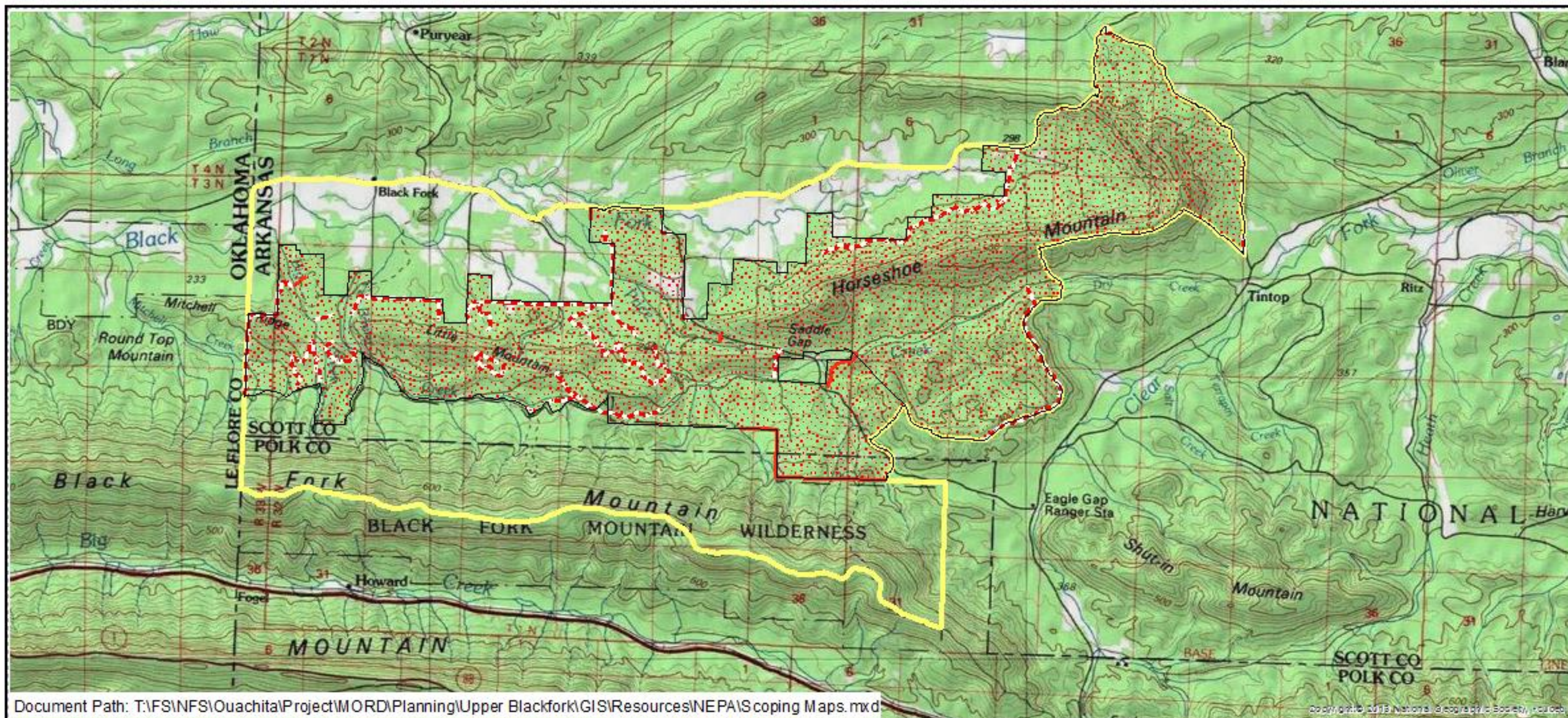
Tim Oosterhous

Tim Oosterhous
District Ranger

See Attachments Map 1-4







Vicinity Map

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Legend

- Upper_Blackfork_Burn_Area
- Upper Blackfork NEW Fireline Construction
- Upper Blackfork Fireline Reconstruction
- Upper Black Fork Project Area

Sheet 3 of 4

Upper Black Fork Project Area

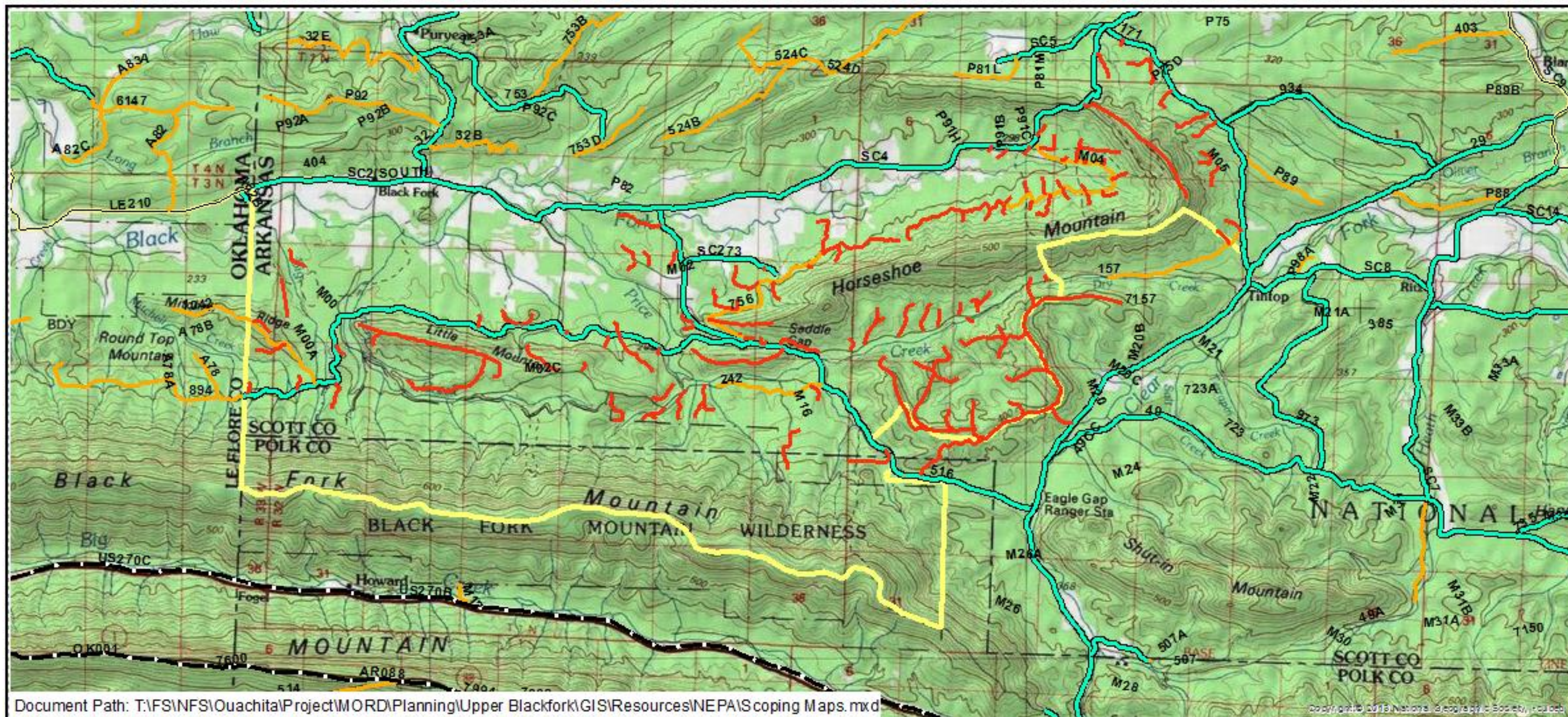
Fuels Reduction Map

Mena-Oden Ranger District
Scott and Polk Counties, Arkansas

U.S. Forest Service - R8
Ouachita National Forest

For more information, contact the Mena Ranger District at 1603 Hwy. 71 North, Mena, AR or phone (479) 394-2382

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Vicinity Map

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Legend

- ~ PROPOSED TEMPORARY ROADS
- EXISTING ROAD MAINTENANCE LEVEL**
 - 1 - BASIC CUSTODIAL CARE (CLOSED)
 - 2 - HIGH CLEARANCE VEHICLES
 - 3 - SUITABLE FOR PASSENGER CARS
 - 4 - MODERATE DEGREE OF USER COMFORT
 - 5 - HIGH DEGREE OF USER COMFORT
- Upper Black Fork Project Area

Sheet 4 of 4

Upper Black Fork Project Area

Transportation Map

Mena-Oden Ranger District
Scott and Polk Counties, Arkansas

U.S. Forest Service - R8
Ouachita National Forest

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